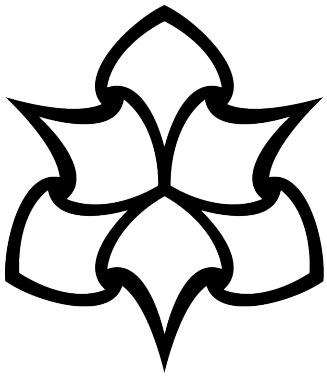

Oldfield, S.J. (2013) *The Manchester Milers 1850-1870*. British Society of Sports History, Annual Conference, Friday 6 – Saturday 7 September at Wychwood Park, Cheshire.

During the mid-nineteenth century, as pedestrianism became an entrepreneurial venture, both the number and types of events increased to satisfy promoters and audiences alike. With pedestrian events regularly attracting large crowds, entrepreneurial publicans promoted and provided land for competitive races, relocating the sport from the turnpike roads and racecourses of Britain to the purpose built stadia attached to rural public houses, whose owners now had control over the sport. Industrial cities became hubs for specific pedestrian events, creating communities for athletes who wished to specialise and become one of the many "champions" advertised and promoted. Whilst London featured a variety of entertainments, it specialised in the long-distance traditional "wobbles" made popular in the early nineteenth century. However, as sprinting (from 110 to 880 yards) and the "miler" became the events of choice for most athletes and spectators alike, due to their fast-paced nature and athlete-friendly training regime, other cities lay claims to their origins. Sheffield became home to the sprinters, with the Hyde Park grounds endorsing many sprinting competitions, whilst Manchester became known as the mile capital, with the top "spinners" of the period venturing to the city to perform, many of whom then settled in and around Lancashire and proceeded to enter the publican trade. The mile championship was held in Manchester annually, and the record for the fastest mile was set in 1865 between two pedestrian publicans who resided in the city. The venues designed for the sport in the 1850s and 1860s only reinforced the importance of such endeavours, attracting further athletes and supporters. This paper will examine the Manchester pedestrian circuit 1850-1870, considering the individuals who contributed to the vibrant "miler" scene that transformed Manchester into a well-respected hotspot for athletic entertainment.

The Modern Mile

The mile race has been a well-established sporting spectacle with Brits such as Seb Coe, Steve Ovett and of course Roger Bannister all being associated with the distance. Now surpassed by the metric mile, 1500m, the popularity of the event has yet to waver with over 600 events run in America in 2013 alone.[1] Historically, Britain's involvement in such events has been well documented – the Oxbridge Universities promoted the distance to their athletes, the AAA provided the mile as a competitive discipline from their inception, being at the heart of the divide between professional and amateur sport in the nineteenth century, and events such as the Emsley Carr mile, inaugurated in 1953, still attract public attention today. Although Bannister is credited with the first sub-four minute mile, Radford states that this time was record in the eighteenth century, albeit under less strict conditions, but this proves that athletes over 200 years earlier were running extraordinary feats and times similar to their nineteenth and twentieth century counterparts which are not to be underestimated. This working paper aims to analyse the importance of the professional mile race during the nineteenth century and explain Manchester's involvement in the success of the event from 1850 onwards.

Pedestrianism in the City

During the mid-nineteenth century, as pedestrianism became an entrepreneurial venture, both the number and types of events increased to satisfy promoters and audiences alike. With pedestrian events regularly attracting large crowds, entrepreneurial publicans promoted and provided land for competitive races, relocating the sport from the turnpike roads and racecourses of Britain to the purpose built stadia attached to rural public houses, whose owners now had control over the sport. Within London, successful running grounds established next to public houses, pleasure gardens and cricket grounds in the late 1840s and early 1850s. The establishment of Hackney Wick changed the fortunes of pedestrianism within the metropolis, with proprietor James Baum enclosing one acre of land attached to the family-ran White Lion in 1857.[2] The pear-shaped gravel running path of 260-yards, later extended to 320-yards, presented an ideal base where activities including foot racing, wrestling and boxing could be enjoyed on the railway embankment for six-pence, or, for an additional cost, within the small pavilion at the top of the slightly uphill finishing straight.[3] Originally

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1 Erin Strout, 'A Mile in Your Flats', *Running Times*, 19 July 2013.

2 Ibid.

3 *Era*, October 19, 1856, 5; March 28, 1858, 14; *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, December 21, 1856, 7.

a low-key venue, the "Wick" quickly gained in popularity when Baum recruited some of the most famed athletes of the period, and spectators flocked to the grounds on the North London Railway, which stopped directly outside the arena.[4] According to Roe, the early years at Hackney Wick were 'instrumental in reviving pedestrianism within London' and the proprietor's enthusiasm in promoting the events was vital to its success.[5]

Manchester's Pedestrian Scene

With industrialisation came the development of cities, the biggest outside of the metropolis being Manchester, and here the pedestrian ventures seen in London were replicated amid the semi-rural suburbs of Salford, Bradford, Pendleton, Hulme, and more notably Newton Heath. Arenas were built next to, and within, the grounds of the local rural public houses and hotels, and some entrepreneurial publicans enclosed their grounds in order to reap the rewards through entrance fees, drink and food proceeds, and betting commissions.[6] Although there were still reports of foot-racing occurring on the roads of Manchester,[7] the majority of events moved to the purpose built stadia where publicans had control over the sport and athletes could be monitored. Manchester's running tracks were designed to accommodate the large crowds that followed the sport, with grandstands built which guaranteed clear views of the events, and space for upwards of 10,000 spectators,[8] and two in particular became favoured by the Manchester public; the Royal Oak and Copenhagen Grounds, both on the Oldham Road, Newton Heath.

Established is 1857, the Copenhagen Grounds became one of leading sporting venues in Manchester during the mid-nineteenth century, hosting pedestrian, wrestling, rabbit coursing and pigeon shooting events, all under the watchful eye of ex-professional runner Thomas Hayes. Attached to the Shear's Inn, Newton Heath, the course consisted of a perfectly straight and well-drained 750-yard circular track, with 235-yard straight 6-yards wide, which was fully enclosed, 'except where the canal forms a boundary', by 5ft high wooden barriers.[9] For an additional fee, upwards of 1,000

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4 'Mr Baum's White Lion, Victoria Park, Hackney Wick, adjoining the Victoria Park station', *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, February 8, 1857, 7; March 29, 1857, 7.

5 Warren Roe, *Front Runners: The First Athletic Track Champions* (Sussex: The Book Guild Ltd, 2002), 22.

6 John Lowerson, *Sport and the English Middle Classes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); Tony Collins and Wray Vamplew, *Mud, Sweat and Beers: A Cultural History of Sport and Alcohol* (Oxford: Berg Publishing, 2002).

7 *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, May 1, 1825, 141; April 28, 1833, n.p.; January 12, 1840, 7; November 12, 1843, 7; December 09, 1849, 7; January 16, 1853, 7.

8 *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, September 27, 1857, 6; March 29, 1857, 7; April 16, 1864, 7; April 23, 1864, 2; August 23, 1865, 9; August 26, 1865, 8.

9 *Era*, March 29, 1857, 13.

spectators could enjoy the 'substantial and commodious stand, from which an uninterrupted view of the contests is obtained'.[10] Hayes' promotion of the mile race was noted when in 1858 he acquired exclusive service of Thomas Horspool, and the first of many records were set.

On August 11 1860, five formidable milers competed for Hayes' Championship Belt, valued at 60 guineas. Albison told the press that the belt was to be his, beating off an in-form Lang and White to win the coveted prize. Lang, unhappy with the result, immediately challenged Albison to a title race (a stipulation of the contest), with Albison eventually beating off all competition to become to outright holder of the belt. Further head-to-head mile matches were promoted within the city but it was not until the development of the Royal Oak that the competition entered a new era.

In November 1863, the once disgraced George Martin, ex-professional hurdler, sprinter, famed trainer and promoter of the "Deerfoot Circus", announced his intention of developing the grounds attached to the Royal Oak Hotel.[11] Location was perfect; Miles Platting railway station was nearby, omnibuses and trams stopped within 200 yards of the ground, and it was less than half a mile from Thomas Hayes' renowned Copenhagen Running Grounds, with whom Martin had prior connections. Sixteen-acres of land were enclosed, boasting a 651 yard circular track, quarter of a mile straight course, a circular 750 yard rabbit course, a wrestling arena, bowling green, quoits ground, trotting course and grandstand all within the fenced enclosure which was capable of holding 20,000 people with ease'.[12] A festival spirit was reported on opening day with crowds of over 3,000 spectators flocking to the ground and the first event, a 'great mile race' between Albison and Sanderson, comprehensively promoted within the sporting press.[13] With the Copenhagen Grounds being within the locality of the Royal Oak, Martin and Hayes, as proprietors of the aforementioned venues, worked in conjunction with each other to ensure profits. Spectators migrated from stadium to stadium and their sporting entertainments became daylong affairs.[14]

In May 1864, Martin announced his intention of holding a 'Great One Mile Sweepstakes' with competitors racing for the right to own a silver cup (weighing 76oz) and £110 cash.[15] Six men put themselves forward, paying £20 entrance fee. In the months prior to the race, many of the men competed against each other, performing one-mile head-to-head wagers in the locale with public interest high. Mills came out victorious on the day, with Lang in second place.

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10 *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, March 29, 1857, 7.
11 *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, November 28, 1863, 7.
12 *Illustrated Sporting News and Theatrical and Musical Review*, April 9, 1864, 54; April 23, 1864, 77.
13 *Era*, April 17, 1864, 14.
14 *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, June 11, 1864, 7; *Era*, July 30, 1865, 14.
15 *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, May 7, 1864, 7; May 14, 1864, 7.

Due to the popularity of the event one year previous, Martin broadcasted yet another Great Mile Footrace entitled the Royal Oak Mile, held on August 19 1865. The event was open to all competitors who paid the £5 entrance fee with ten of the best milers confirmed; the six who previously entered were joined by Scottish champion Robert McInstray, William "Welshman" Richards, who was training in London before settling in Manchester, George Martin's protégé Charles Mower and John Neary of Hulme. All competed for the Royal Oak Cup, 'an elegant vase about 15 inches in height, beautifully chased, bearing a shield on each size, and (emblematic of the grounds) the top of the lid was formed of acorns', £30 plus half of the gate money being divided between first, second, third and fourth place. The favourite, Teddy Mills, exited due to injury putting betting odds in favour of Lang. At 5:22pm the race came off with the fastest mile ever recorded displayed to the delight of the 30,000 plus spectators, known as the dead-heat mile with a time of 4:17¾ for both William "Crowcatcher" Lang (prepared by Hardy of Derbyshire) and William "Welshman" Richards (prepared by George Martin at the Royal Oak – conveniently Martin was also starter and timekeeper so make of it what you will!). This record stood for nearly 16 years until 1881 when William J. Cummings became the 'Champion Miler of England' with a time of 4:16⅕.[16] Eventually Lang took the title when a rematch on August 26 1865 was scheduled.

When the Copenhagen Grounds lease expired in 1869, the grounds closed and Hayes took licence at the Haymarket Hotel, Deansgate, and still supporting pedestrianism by forging ties with local promoters and arenas, including Peter Waddacor at the City Grounds. Developed in rural Bradford, the City Grounds became a first-class rabbit course and pedestrian venue attached to Grange Farm, later the Grange Hotel. Whilst at the grounds Waddacor used his sporting connections to develop an extensive programme of events – Sergeant Britain and William Lang being major promoters of ped events and Tommy Hayes continued the success of the mile race by promoting the Great One Mile Sweepstakes on April 9 1870. However, according to the *Otago Witness*(1885) it was after the 1865 race that public attention diminished and the mile race seemed to go out of favour with professionals with the Sheffield handicaps and shorter distances becoming more fashionable.

Manchester Mile Events

During the period 1857-1868, all records for the mile were set in Manchester at either the Royal Oak or Copenhagen Grounds respectively. Further mile races were competed at Thomas Warren's Snipe Inn Grounds, Audenshaw, and the Ash Inn Grounds, Stockport. The question posed is why did

[16] Professional runner – made famous by competing in a series of events against "amateur" Walter George.

Manchester become the hub for such an event? By looking further into the individuals who competed at this distance some initial thoughts can be considered.

Collective Biography

The combination of case studies and biographical narratives in a collective form cements their use as a methodological tool in historical research, helping to build knowledge of society within a real-life context and identifying innovative topics for examination. Biographical narrative can be used to gain legitimate knowledge of society, moving away from simply reporting observations to applying them to broader social and cultural theories, a method called prosopography.[17] Prosopography, or collective biography, describes "external features of a population group that the researcher has determined has something in common", following the creation of, and/or interrogation of, individual biographies through archival research and the analysis of that data to contextualise historical processes in a specific locale. By examining social ties and connections between people, ideological or cultural change can be determined by examining surviving evidence and documentation relating to persons of lower social status who are common to all historical periods. According to Oldfield and Day, as sport historians look toward the future, the prosopographical method should be more readily employed, theorising the discipline and furthering the development of the constructionist approach within sport.

If I take a look at the individuals who completed in the 1864 Royal Oak Mile as an exemplar, it is clear to see several reoccurring similarities and anomalies in their histories. It is therefore important to note how these commonalities and differences can be used to create an overall view of the pedestrian during the period.

Some initial observations:

- Majority born outside of Manchester but many resided in and around the neighbouring parishes whilst competing contributing to the vibrant pedestrian scene – movement into the

[17] Biography, by definition, is a collection of life documents "which describe turning-point moments in individuals' lives" (Denzin, 1989, p. 7), but collective, or group biography, is not the biography of groups, "but rather the study of biographical details about individuals in aggregate", analysing the connections between individuals, not the specifics which make their lives unique (Smythe, 2000, p. 85). Both are related, but as Magdalino (2003) notes, "the primary concern of one [is] the secondary concern of the other" (p. 42). Biography has long been a respected source for historical research but group biography has been judged as a lesser instrument due to its ambiguous nature and lack of socio-historic use, causing those who use it to have to justify its power as an analytical tool (Erben, 1998; Shapin & Thackray, 1974; Jones, 2001).

city important during this period as Manchester sees a second boom during the 1870s after the cotton famine.

- Variations on height and weight but these are in proportion showing that a slender frame was more suited to the all-rounder distance pursuits favoured by these men.
- Many had more than one specialist distance with the one to ten mile being favoured and competed in by all (with varying levels of success). However, according to Roe, all six men competed and set times that were deemed "exceptional" in most distances – for example, they all completed a sub 4:30 mile.
- Training was crucial to success – all men employed a trainer and then later took the these principles and applied them in preparing their own athletes. Some transfer from pedestrianism into other sports (Mills and pugilism), was this common?
- Successful careers ended whilst athletes were relatively young so the next step was to move into the sporting business by acquiring a pub and many then went on to promote pedestrianism and other sports through their hostelries.

Conclusion

Several conclusions can be drawn from this information; most importantly some interpretations as to why Manchester became a sporting capital in its own right. Many of Manchester's public houses were under the management of successful athletes, and this presented a base for which the performer could agree matches, promote their races, and display colours and trophies. Many sporting publicans became coaches and trainers of their own athletes who were usually housed within the hostelry, reinforcing the relationship between sport and the public house.[18] Manchester was home to the mile race and the top mile "spinners" of the period ventured to the city to perform,[19] many of whom then settled in and around Lancashire and proceeded to enter the

[18] In 1855, pedestrian trainer James Greaves took over the *Ring of Bells* where anyone attending foot races in Sheffield area would 'meet with every accommodation' according to *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, March 18, 1855, 6. Trainer "Choppy" Warburton, born James Edward, became landlord of *The Fisher's Arms* in Blackburn in 1877 (Richard O. Watson, *'Choppy' Warburton: Long Distance Runner and Trainer of Cycling Champions. Hero or Villain?* (London: E Wiley Books, 2006)), and George Martin, ex-professional hurdler, housed athletes in his "stable" in Manchester before taking licence at the *Royal Oak*, Manchester, in 1864 (Samantha-Jayne Oldfield, 'George Martin, 'Wizard of Pedestrianism' and Manchester's Sporting Entrepreneur', *Sporting Lives*, ed. David Day (in press, Manchester: Manchester Metropolitan University Press, 2011), 142-166).

[19] Siah Albison of Bowlee held the record for the mile in 1856, completing the distance in 4 minutes and 22 ½ seconds, whilst John White from Gateshead was a regular competitor for the mile championship belt, regularly participating in the city (*Manchester Guardian*, November 16, 1861, 5), and William Lang of Middlesbrough, Samuel Brighton of Norwich, Job Smith of Hulme, and William "The American Deer" Jackson competed in mile events within Manchester in front of large crowds (*Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, October 2, 1859, 7; August 26, 1865, 9; *Colonist*, June 17, 1862, 4); *Bell's Life in London*

publican trade.[20] The mile championship was held in Manchester,[21] and the record for the fastest mile was set here, which then attracted further athletes and supporters.[22] The traditional route for the licensed victualler emphasises the transition from athlete to publican,[23] many of which then obtained running grounds or aligned with neighbouring venues. Along Oldham Road, between Manchester's city centre and Newton Heath, a community for pedestrianism formed with over forty sporting inns emerging between 1850 and 1870 during the peak of professional activities.

- Competition in Manchester was provided for – there are continuous reports of matches for the mile between different combinations of the competitors are promoted and their involvement with each other as backers, trainers and promoters just reinforces an idea of "specialisation". Athletes become trainers and train each other in specialist events – stables clearly show that a particular style of training was adhered to and each CoP had their own insiders and outsiders. Principles were shared amongst individuals on the inside but this was an exclusive club. If we look at Lang and Albison we see two distinct CoP with Lang's London connection (Martin, Price and Mills) being a major influence on his training practices, whereas Albison has a very Northern connection with Etchells and Booth, both Manchester natives, in control of his preparation, and guiding his career towards developing further Manchester based peds.

Further contextual conclusions: this type of competition (group starts) shows a clear connection between pedestrianism and athletics. As pedestrianism started to suffer from a decline in attendance and concerns over the publican's role in the authenticity of the events ignited discussions on match fixing, the legitimacy of head-to-head and matches against time became questionable. The movement towards group challenges, with prizes rather than wagers being the main reward, mirrors that of middle-class amateur athletics competitions that gained popularity during the late nineteenth century, attempting to reorganise sport in order to abolish gambling, a

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and Sporting Chronicle, August 26, 1865, 7; John Henry Walsh, *British Rural Sports; Comprising Shooting, Hunting, Coursing, Fishing, Hawking, Racing, Boating, and Pedestrianism, With All Rural Games and Amusements* (London: Frederick Warne & Co., 1886), 631-633.

[20] William Lang took licence at the *Navigation Inn*, Great Ancoats Street, Manchester, from 1863 (*Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, December 12, 1863, 7; September 2, 1865, 7), and Edwin Mills and John Nevin took licence at the Royal Oak after the untimely death of their good friend George Martin (*Manchester Guardian*, August 25, 1866, 8; *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, December 8, 1866, 7).

[21] *Manchester Guardian*, April 3, 1865, 4; July 14, 1865, 4; September 4, 1865, 4; February 19, 1866, 4; *Penny Illustrated Paper*, August 26, 1865, 206.

[22] *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, August 19, 1865, 8; August 26, 1865, 2; August 26, 1865, 8; August 26, 1865, 9.

[23] Examples of which are detailed in Pierce Egan, *Boxiana; or, Sketches of Ancient and Modern Pugilism, from the Days of the Renowned Broughton and Slack, to the Championship of Cribb: Volume 1* (London: George Virtue, 1830), 66, 121, 151, 270, 422-423, 476.

major problem during this period. Perhaps pedestrianism continued to acquire a following due to the strategic organisation of such events as the Royal Oak Mile, which meant match fixing became more difficult to arrange, false starts were less likely to occur and articles of agreement were no longer needed for competitions to transpire. From 1870 onwards there was a noticeable decline in distance events in favour of much shorter sprinting competitions where, again, the outcomes were more genuine and less affected by promoters. This all signifies a change in previous practices, addressing the public's concerns and encouraging a new wave of pedestrianism to flourish.

I still have questions that I need to answer regarding Manchester's pedestrian scene so any observations and thoughts regarding this research as currently presented would be very much appreciated. Thanks for your time.